2:Richards E-5 (1930-1934)1939
FQ5 Bemba FQ5

CHAPTER IV

EATING AND DRINKING

Infant Feeding.

THE dietetic prejudices of any people must have their basis in their methods of infant feeding, and it is probable that the most characteristic distinctions between the Bemba attitude to food and our own are occasioned by differences in early training. Unfortunately, it is just on this aspect of Bemba nutrition that it is most difficult to collect accurate information. Babies are suckled at any hour of the day or night, whenever they cry. As they grow older, they are carried about the village on their elder sisters' backs, and seem to be given choice morsels by admiring or affectionate relatives at every hut. When food is plentiful, children under three nibble at something wherever they go. Throughout childhood it is therefore almost impossible to keep any quantitative record of diet. Certain broad facts, however, stand out in contrast to our own methods of infant feeding, and Bemba theory is interesting in this respect.

As in most other African communities, babies are suckled until they are between two and three years old. There is a strong taboo observed by all except urbanized natives on the conception of a new child before the weaning of the last. When the child is four months old, a special rite, 'the taking of the child', *ukupoko mwana*, is performed by the father and mother, and after this ceremony, *coitus interruptus* may be allowed between the parents, but it is considered very dangerous for the mother to become pregnant before her first baby has been successfully weaned. The child will fall ill of a particular disease, *ukulwale lunse*, of which the symptoms are coughing, wasting, or diarrhoea. Even in urbanized districts where the taboo is less rigidly observed, mothers are still uneasy. If a child has been hurriedly weaned to make way for a successor, and later falls ill, the parents are charged with the trouble. Neighbours shake their heads, and if the illness is fatal, whisper that the child has been killed by the mother's folly. There is no doubt that early weaning is still largely prevented by the fear of endangering the baby's life.

It is difficult to know whether the mother, at the end of this long

2:Richards E-5 (1930-1934)1939
FQ5 Bemba FQ5

●853 period of suckling, is able to give her child any nourishment at all. Two or three years after the birth of the baby her breasts have begun to hang down like wrinkled leather bags. But natives say that the glands go on secreting as long as the child sucks the breast. 'On the first day nothing comes from the breast but a fluid like water. On the second day, in the evening, the breasts are full (*ukusaka*) with a white liquid.' After some months they say the fluid is less, but that the secretion may continue for most of a woman's life. If the mother dies the baby is suckled by its grandmother, either as a form of consolation, or actually in the belief that it is getting food. I know a case of a woman who had suckled seven children of her own, evenly spread at about three years apart, and who then began to nurse the baby of her eldest daughter, who had died in childbirth.

It seems obvious that with a woman of this age, the baby is dependent on comfort and caresses from its grandmother rather than actual nourishment, and this is probably largely the case with the two- or three-year-old child just before it is weaned. I have already described the way in which Bemba babies cling to their mother's breasts if frightened or distressed, or demand to be suckled long after they have been weaned, at moments of illness or misery.[1] In fact I have wondered whether the natives regard the mother's milk as primarily a food at all. On the one hand they recognize that lactation depends upon what the mother eats. I have heard women say on different occasions, 'You can't suckle a child on mushrooms without porridge', 'Her breasts are full as she ate meat last night', 'If she doesn't eat how can she feed the child?', or 'Of course my baby is defecating all day long since I am eating nothing but pumpkins'. On the other hand no woman I questioned would definitely commit herself to the statement that the mother's milk was food. A term for 'milk' does not exist among these agri-
[192] cultural people. The word *umukaka*, used of cow's milk drunk by Europeans, is borrowed from Nyasaland. One woman described the mother's milk as *amafina*,[2] the general term for any kind of secretion, whether from the nose or ears. Another said, 'It is water. Well, really, it is just the breast', and a third quite definitely, 'It is water only, not food. To suckle is not to appease hunger. You give the child the breast perpetually to quieten him,

[1] *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe*, 1932, p. 44.
[2] Distinguish from *amafi* = faeces. Cf. p. 51.

2:Richards E-5 (1930-1934)1939
FQ5 Bemba FQ5

not to feed him.'[1] Statements which would readily account for the suckling of children by old women. In these circumstances it is not surprising that the act of suckling has become symbolic of the mother's generosity in Bemba literature and daily speech. Speaking of the son-to-mother relation men say in sentimental tones, 'How should a mother refuse her child anything when she has suckled him with her breasts'? Praying to his great ancestress Bwalya Cabala, Chief Mwamba said, 'You who suckled us and carried us on your back in a skin'. The legal dues of the mother's family are sometimes based on this service the woman has done for the child, and only a sister can act as a substitute for a dead mother.

The belief that the breasts give comfort rather than nourishment is correlated with the practice of feeding infants with supplementary foods, The Bemba deny entirely that a baby can live even for a few weeks on its mother's milk alone. From the third or fourth week the infant is fed with a thin milk gruel known as *umusunga*. This is made in the first place by stirring a little flour into warm water[2] held in the hollow of the hand, and later by throwing a small handful of flour into boiling water and stirring until a smooth paste of the consistency of gruel results. It is often sour since it is considered bad to throw away remains of gruel blessed by the spirits. This *umusunga* is literally rammed down the baby's throat in spite of its protests. However the child may scream, splutter, or cough up the food, it is relentlessly forced down again, pushed with the mother's fore-finger or held in the baby's mouth while the food is stroked down his throat, as a European may force a dog to swallow a pill. This behaviour of the mother shows how important she considers the additional food. In every other respect she indulges every whim of her baby, suckling him whenever he wishes and giving him whatever he cries for, but on this one point she is firm. 'How can the child get strong if he has nothing but the breast?' parents will say indignantly. They criticize severely European mothers, who suckle their babies for six months without additional food: 'Look at those white women! They have their cupboards full of tins of sugar and flour, and yet they grudge the

[1] *Amenshi fye epela! Kuonka te kuikuta yo! Kumupela ibele pefye ni kumunashya ku mutima epela!*

[2] Not boiling water for fear lumps would be formed. Girls at Lubwa training school are taught to simmer the gruel a little.

2:Richards E-5 (1930-1934)1939
FQ5 Bemba FQ5

•853 baby a little food.' I noticed, in fact, that in a native family where the father had been taught at a Mission School that it was wrong to feed a new-born baby on gruel, he yet insisted that his child should have condensed milk as well as the breast. He was as convinced as the rest of his fellows that the child would not grow up on the breast alone, and did not want people to say that he grudged his baby anything needed for its health.

[262] Thus the native's dependence on millet porridge is a habit literally forced on him from his earliest days, in fact before he has acquired the necessary ferments for digesting the starch at all. By three or four months he has become entirely used to the gruel, and by eight or nine months he is being given small lumps of *ubwali* to eat by himself. This system of cramming the infant's stomach is considered by most Europeans to be harmful, and to be responsible for the protruding abdomens of all Bemba children, although these latter may be due to enlarged spleens as well as to unsuitable diet.

[165] The mortality of children between the ages of one and three is enormously high, for a variety of reasons, not only those connected with diet. It is impossible to be dogmatic on this point without further information. But it must be admitted that the Bemba infants cry less and have a more contented appearance than the children of the same age in this country.

When a child has reached the crawling age he is allowed and even encouraged to eat everything he can. I never heard a mother trying to restrict a small child's diet, but always boasting proudly about what a lot the child knew how to eat. He is given small handfuls of food in all his relations' houses, toddling from one hut door to another. Small children are always given the remains of food not thought good enough for grown-ups. Infants of under a year are fed with the beer dregs from last night's party, mothers saying with satisfaction: 'Look at that child. How strong he is! He likes beer already,' and any account of Bemba dishes includes a list of foods which 'no grown-up person would touch. Only children eat that.' In this way, therefore, the Bemba mother differs from the European with her more rigid ideas as to the digestive powers of her children.

To conclude, the characteristics of the Bemba system of infant feeding are three. First the length of the suckling period, and the complete freedom of the infant in feeding, both of psychological importance to the baby as well as nutritional, and valued by the

2:Richards E-5 (1930-1934)1939
FQ5 Bemba FQ5

native for the former reason only; second, the use of a supplementary cereal practically from birth, and the mother's absolute insistence on the necessity of this food, in every case the staple millet; third, the irregularity of infant feeding from the first days of life till the third or fourth year—a point which we shall have to develop further.

Eating Customs.

In this country medical practitioners tell us that digestion is affected by the rate at which food is swallowed, the temperature at which it is served, the proportion of liquid to solid, and the size and spacing of meals. Mothers of all classes are taught to suckle their babies at regular intervals. In well-to-do nurseries it is considered of the utmost importance that food should be served punctually and that, roughly speaking, the same amounts should be eaten each day. Children are constantly instructed how to carry out such an apparently instinctive act as putting food into their mouths. They are told not to eat 'so fast', or alternatively not to 'dawdle', to chew their food longer, to drink at special times, or to eat either more or less than they apparently seem inclined to. In all these matters, the mother is guided, partly by the theories she has acquired as to what is best for the child's digestion, and partly by her conception that eating a meal is a definite social activity in which the young must be carefully taught to play their part. Eating takes place at fixed intervals in the day's routine, often in special rooms allotted for the purpose. To eat at a different speed from others, to demand more or less than they do, to sit in a different manner, or talk in a different way is a breach of etiquette. Later, in an industrial country, the child is caught in the grip of the economic machine. He sits down to his midday dinner when the siren hoots, and to his evening meal when he comes home from work. For the greater majority of people in this country, it is rare for meals to vary in time more than from half an hour to an hour, or to eat food that differs from day to day in amount and composition. The whole complex of behaviour patterns that we roughly call 'eating customs' depends not only on physiological factors, but on the type of food eaten by a people, the material apparatus used for cooking and serving it, the system of housing, the rules of division observed by the community, and the routine of economic activities into which the preparation and

2:Richards E-5 (1930-1934)1939
FQ5 Bemba FQ5

Southern or Eastern Bantu there is no doubt that the father, and after him the elder brother, has the predominant rights over the property of the young. Secondly, and this is a point which we have to recur to frequently, the fact that the Bemba never kept cattle or any form of wealth that could be measured or counted naturally affects their attitude to money. To change from the 'cattle standard' to money currency appears to be an easy transition in some ways, and all over Africa natives are earning money and turning it into cattle or, conversely, giving cattle to relatives who sell the beasts and so get money. But where kinship prerogatives consist of undefined rights to exact service and to demand food when in need the substitution of money seems a less obvious equivalent. Where it occurs, and it is beginning to occur, it creates an entirely new relationship between elder and younger, son-in-law and father-in-law, rather than a modification of the old. Nor have the elders the same bargaining power with the young as in some Bantu tribes at the present day. We are told from such widely distant areas as South Africa and Uganda that boys who earn money away from this tribal area return to give a share to their fathers or brothers for fear the latter will not provide them with cattle or goats for their marriage payments.[1] The Bemba boy on the other hand gave service for his bride and was therefore not beholden to his elders to any large extent, and is not so to-day. He gives money to his father-in-law for his bride, and he distributes presents among his relatives as he pleases, but this is considered an act of grace, I think, and not a due. It is not true to say that the young Bemba of to-day are hampered in their progress by the exorbitant demands of the old.

Education in Distribution.

To conclude, the Bemba system of food consumption is determined by rules of individual ownership subject to the claims of elder relatives. How is this set of economic values impressed on each new generation? What sanctions exist to enforce the various rules involved?

Among the Bemba it is clear that there are certain well-marked attitudes towards the use of food which the child learns to adopt almost from babyhood. In the infant's life edible objects are things which his mother and near relatives never refuse to give him on

[1] K. Oberg, 'Banyankole Kinship Organization', *Africa*, vol. xi, April 1938, pp. 153, 158.

2:Richards E-5 (1930-1934)1939
FQ5 Bemba FQ5

●853 demand, and conversely, his circle of close kinsfolk are those who never deny his requests for food. The Bemba mother suckles her baby whenever he crys, and as he grows older she never says 'No' as long as there is anything in the house which he can eat. To refuse to feed a child who is hungry is one of the worst possible crimes and the words 'To refuse porridge' (*ukutano bwali*) are usually uttered with a special note of disapproval in the voice.
[538] Folk-tales describe with moral indignation the behaviour of the woman who denies a hungry child, and the infant is early aware of his rights with respect to food. Even babies are touchy in this matter and always on the look-out for offence. I have heard children of 8 or 10 burst out on to the veranda of a mother's or a grandmother's hut sobbing in a most heartfelt way: 'They have refused me porridge' (*bantano bwali*). Examination might prove that the child had merely had a slightly smaller portion of porridge than its fellow, but it felt the insult deeply apparently. I have seen an older girl flounce out of the house of an aunt using the same words, 'They have refused me porridge', when she had merely not been invited sufficiently heartily to join the evening meal. In the hunger season this phrase *bantano bwali* is constantly on fretful children's lips.

But this expectation of food is limited to a definite circle of relatives. Those households which the child describes as 'at our place' (*kumiesu*), i.e. chiefly those of his mother, her sisters, and his grandmother, are early distinguished, and I have often watched toddlers, starting on a slow and arduous progress from hut to hut, wherever they might expect to find dainties and knew they could take them without rebuke. Within this circle of relatives the child early realizes that he is only getting what is his due. The European
576 child brought up in the individual family expects to be fed by one or two people only, and knows that the others who entertain him are doing so by way of exception out of kindness. He is constantly taught to express gratitude to such individuals and this training begins so early that in most European languages there is some monosyllable such as 'ta' which the baby is taught to use when it cannot pronounce the more formal 'thank you' properly. The Bemba child on the other hand is at home in a far bigger circle of relatives and takes their help for granted. From any member of this wider ring of kinsmen he can count on support as his due. One native explained when I asked why a certain young man had